

Reid, Murdoch

& Company

Building

Preliminary Summary of Information
December 4, 1975

Commission on Chicago Historical
and Architectural Landmarks

REID, MURDOCH & COMPANY BUILDING
(now Central Office Building, City of Chicago)
320 North Clark Street
Chicago, Illinois

Dates of construction: 1913-14

Architect: George C. Nimmons

The Reid, Murdoch & Company Building embodies several of the characteristics of the Chicago school of architecture, an architectural style that developed and flourished in Chicago in the last years of the nineteenth century and the first few years of the twentieth. This style of architecture was based upon a technological innovation: the substitution of skeleton frame construction for the earlier method of masonry bearing wall construction. Simplicity, openness, fine proportions, originality in the use of architectural ornament, and direct aesthetic expression of the supporting skeleton frame were the hallmarks of the Chicago school as it was developed by Louis Sullivan, John Wellborn Root, William Holabird, Martin Roche, and others.

In the last years of the nineteenth century, these architects rejected historical revival styles and produced straightforward designs for tall commercial buildings; "skyscraper" was the term coined at this time to describe these buildings. However, the World's Columbian Exposition, held in Chicago in 1893, made revival styles of architecture popular once again and soon skyscraper facades exhibited decorative elements derived from various historical styles. But the Reid, Murdoch Building, designed by George C. Nimmons in 1913, was an exception. Here, the steel and concrete frame provides the general overall form for a strong exterior design. The design is enhanced by the excellent proportions and high level of craftsmanship and detailing of the brick and terra-cotta facade.

The most prominent feature of the design is the tall central tower, which exhibits numerous characteristics of the work of Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, and other Chicago architects of the early twentieth century. According to architectural historian Carl Condit, these characteristics include "shallow balconies, the close vertical pattern arising from the grouped windows and the strongly emphasized mullions, and the wide overhang of the roof that terminates the upward movement with a broad horizontal sweep."

The Reid, Murdoch Building is handsomely sited on the river's edge across from Wacker Drive. Nimmons most likely made an effort to conform to the proposals of D.H. Burnham and Edward H. Bennett's Chicago Plan of 1909. The Chicago Plan called for a "comprehensive and adequate development of the river banks, so that the commercial facilities shall be extended while at the same time the aesthetic side of the problem shall be worked out." In the Reid, Murdoch Building, the docking facilities are recessed below street level and a promenade extends along the river's edge at street level.

Nimmons was acquainted with the ideas of the author of the Chicago Plan, for he had begun his architectural career as a draftsman in the office of D.H. Burnham.

George C. Nimmons

George Croll Nimmons was born in Wooster, Ohio, on July 8, 1865. After graduating from the University of Wooster in 1887, Nimmons came to Chicago and got a job with Burnham. In 1898, Nimmons formed an architectural partnership with William K. Fellows (1870-1948). During their twelve-year partnership, Nimmons and Fellows designed a number of commercial buildings, including the Lesher Building (515 South Franklin Street; built 1902, demolished 1947), the Stratford Building (418 South Wells Street; built 1907), and the Arthur Dixon Building (411 South Wells Street; built 1908). In 1904, Nimmons and Fellows received "the largest single commission in the history of Chicago building up to that date," according to Carl Condit. They were asked to design a warehouse, distribution, and administrative center for Sears, Roebuck & Company on West Arthington Street at Homan Avenue. With this commission, Nimmons became keenly interested in the design of industrial buildings.

In 1926, Nimmons wrote an article on "Industrial Buildings" for an issue of The American Architect. Nimmons felt that in an industrial society like the United States industrial buildings should be given considerable attention by architects. This was not the case however. According to Nimmons: "architects...have not as a rule sought to secure industrial buildings for their practice....the industrial building is, as a rule, the ugliest and most objectionable building that is erected in any community." Nimmons believed that an industrial building should be a congenial element in the community. The Reid, Murdoch Building is an excellent example of this belief in practice.

Nimmons and Fellows continued in partnership until 1910; the

following year Fellows went into partnership with Dwight H. Perkins and John L. Hamilton. Nimmons practiced on his own until 1928, when he formed a partnership with George Wallace Carr and Clark Chittenden Wright. Nimmons, Carr and Wright became Carr and Wright in 1947, when George Nimmons died.

Description and History

The Reid, Murdoch Building stands seven stories above street level; there are two additional stories below street level. Crowning the building is a three-story clock tower. The building stretches 320 feet along the Chicago River and is approximately 188 feet deep.

The building is of skeleton construction; the frame is steel and concrete. All floors and footings are supported by wood piles driven to hardpan.

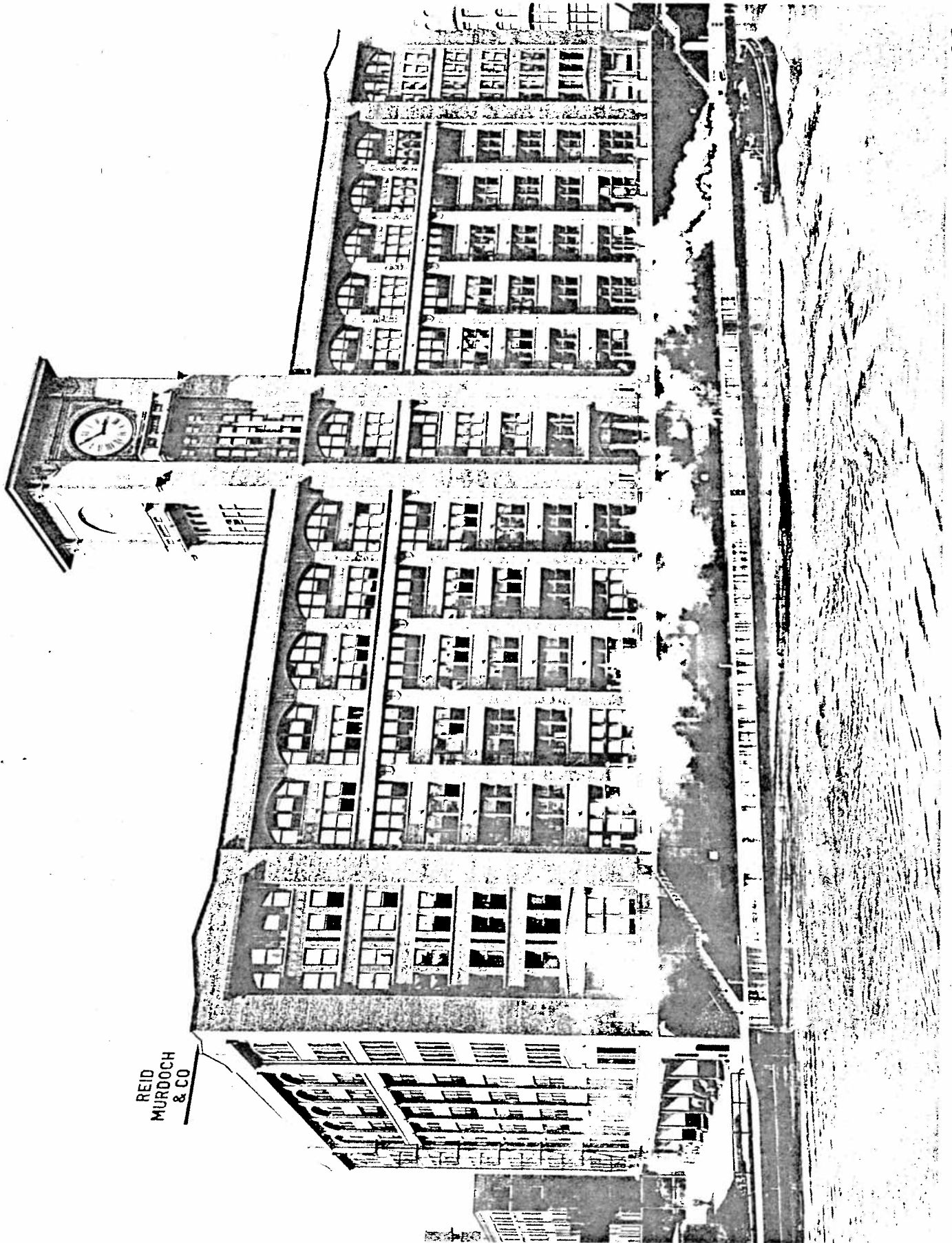
The skeleton frame is sheathed in roman brick and glass. A substantial amount of window area admits a maximum amount of light into the deep, high-ceilinged interior spaces.

The facade is characterized by a crisp geometric severity softened by a variety of artistic details that are well integrated into a visually striking composition. The horizontal and vertical elements of the river facade are nicely balanced. The overall horizontal form of the building itself is re-enforced by the long, low bands of windows and by the low arcaded top story. The elongated roman brick, with horizontal mortar joints raked and vertical mortar joints flush with the brick, adds further to the horizontal emphasis. Balancing these horizontal elements are the bold vertical thrust of the clock tower, the heavy piers that set the tower and the two slightly projecting end bays off from the rest of the building, and the almost continuous piers that separate the windows. Terra-cotta accents further enhance the facade design. All of these elements contribute to a sensitively handled, beautifully executed building in the best tradition of the Chicago school.

The Reid, Murdoch Building was completed in 1914 at a cost of \$800,000. Reid, Murdoch & Company used it as a warehouse and office building, a function it served even after it was sold to Monarch Foods Company. Today it is owned by the City of Chicago and officially known as the Central Office Building. It houses various municipal courts and offices, including those of the City Architect and the Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks.

The structure remained intact until 1926. At that time LaSalle Street was widened, and the western twenty feet of the building were removed. The west end bay was entirely reconstructed so that a feeling of symmetry still exists, although the building is no longer symmetrical. Sometime after 1926, the low pitched gables over the end bays were removed and replaced by a continuation of the parapet at the top of the building.

When the city of Chicago purchased the building in 1955 for its own use, over \$3,000,000 was spent on remodeling the interior spaces. The building was extensively repaired, modernized, and subdivided; the exterior was cleaned; and new entrances, elevators, and escalators were installed.



The Reid, Murdoch & Company Building shortly after construction.

